

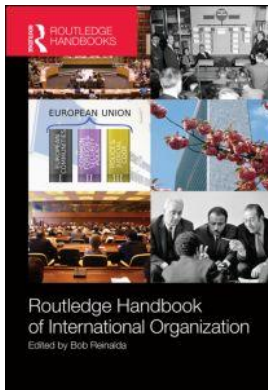
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Data and analyses of voting in the United Nations General Assembly

Erik Voeten

Voting in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has attracted scholarly attention right from the United Nations' (UN) inception. Renowned scholars such as Hayward Alker, Robert Keohane, Arend Lijphart, John Mueller, and Bruce Russett made their early marks with analyses of UN voting. These early studies viewed the UNGA as an arena in which broader patterns of behavior in world politics could be observed. Inspired by the behavioral revolution and methodological advances in the study of roll-call voting, these studies sought to identify voting blocs and dimensions of contestation in world politics.

In the 1970s this research program came under fire from scholars who argued that it was methodologically rather than conceptually driven and that it provided little justification for focusing on the UNGA as a microcosm for world politics (Keohane 1969; Alger 1970; Riggs et al. 1970; Dixon 1981). Robert Keohane (1969) accused studies of UN politics of suffering from the "Mount Everest syndrome," arguing that the UN is studied because it is there, without asking relevant and important theoretical questions. Arguably, the UN also had become a less significant venue by the 1970s and suffered from what Ernst Haas (1983) called "regime decay."

Consequently, the study of the UN was put on the backburner. A good indicator is the number of articles published in the primary sub-disciplinary journal, *International Organization (IO)*, as well as the primary journal for the entire discipline, the *American Political Science Review (APSR)*. Riggs et al. (1970) counted 247 articles in *IO*, and 16 in *APSR* from 1950 to 1969 whose main topic was an investigation of some aspect of the UN. In the 1970s, 32 articles on the UN appeared in *IO* and four in the *APSR*. Between 1980 and 2000 only eight articles that explicitly investigated the UN were published in *IO*, whereas the *APSR* had not published an article with the UN as a main topic of investigation since 1976, until the Doyle and Sambanis (2000) study of the effect of peacekeeping operations.

The 2000s saw a return of interest in the UN, especially its peacekeeping functions and the Security Council. This did not lead to renewed attention for UNGA voting patterns, aside from a few exceptions (Kim and Russett 1996; Voeten 2000). Yet UNGA voting data began to be used for an entirely different purpose: to construct indicators of similarity in

“state preferences.” Since 1998, there have been over 50 published studies that use an indicator based on UN votes as a dependent variable and more commonly as an independent variable. Scholars have used these indicators to examine the impact of shared interests on the likelihood of inter-state disputes (e.g., Gartzke 1998), the distribution of foreign aid (e.g., Alesina and Dollar 2000), and the lending behavior of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Thacker 1999). Others used UN votes as dependent variables to answer research questions such as whether socialization through intergovernmental organizations leads to convergence in member-state interests (Bearce and Bondanella 2007), whether the European Union has started to form a cohesive foreign policy (Drieskens 2010), and whether the United States (US) is starting to get increasingly isolated on foreign policy issues on which it has lobbied (Voeten 2004).

This chapter reviews the usage of UN voting data for both purposes: analyses of voting blocs and the construction of indicators of the common interests of states. I argue that studies that use UN voting data to measure common interests pay insufficient attention to the content of UN votes and use inadequate methods to construct indicators of interest similarity. I show how ignoring (changes in) the UN’s agenda and dimensions of contestation can lead to serious biases. Before delving into substantive applications, I briefly describe the existing data, which now range from 1946 to 2011.

Description of United Nations voting data

The most recent UN voting data set was assembled by Anton Strezhnev and Erik Voeten (2012) but it contains data collected by many scholars. The first source is the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research’s *United Nations Roll Call Data, 1946–1985* data set (ICPSR 1982), which is itself a collection of various data gathering efforts. The Strezhnev–Voeten data set uses only non-unanimous plenary votes, although the ICPSR data also include information about Committee votes for the first 29 sessions of the General Assembly (but not thereafter). The Strezhnev–Voeten data include votes from emergency special sessions, such as on Hungary or the Suez Canal crisis.

The data after 1985 come from various updates from Soo Yeon Kim and Bruce Russett (1996), Erik Gartzke and Dong-Joon Jo (2002), and Erik Voeten (2000) up to the latest release from Strezhnev and Voeten (2012). Unfortunately, these newer data do not include failed votes on resolutions nor do they include votes on paragraphs and amendments. Such votes have become somewhat rare in the modern UN era, but they do occur and can be quite important (with paragraph votes the most common).¹ Unfortunately, records of these votes are also more difficult to locate. An update is being prepared to include such votes, but these data are not yet available at the time of writing.

The Strezhnev–Voeten data include 5,140 votes in 65 UNGA sessions. States are recorded as either voting “yes,” “abstain,” or “no.” The predominant view in the literature is that these choices should be treated as ordinal in that a “no” vote is a stronger signal of disapproval than an abstention. States can also be absent from the UNGA. Unfortunately, many studies confuse absences and abstentions, suggesting that absences are indications of disapproval of a resolution. A more realistic interpretation is that most absences have other causes, such as government turnovers that lead to states temporarily having no UN delegation. Indeed, in 68 percent of cases where a state is absent, it will also be absent on the next roll call on the agenda. This is inconsistent with a view that absences are generally protests against specific resolutions.² Confusing absences with abstentions could lead to serious biases given that absences are common (9 percent of observations, compared to 12 percent abstentions and 7 percent no

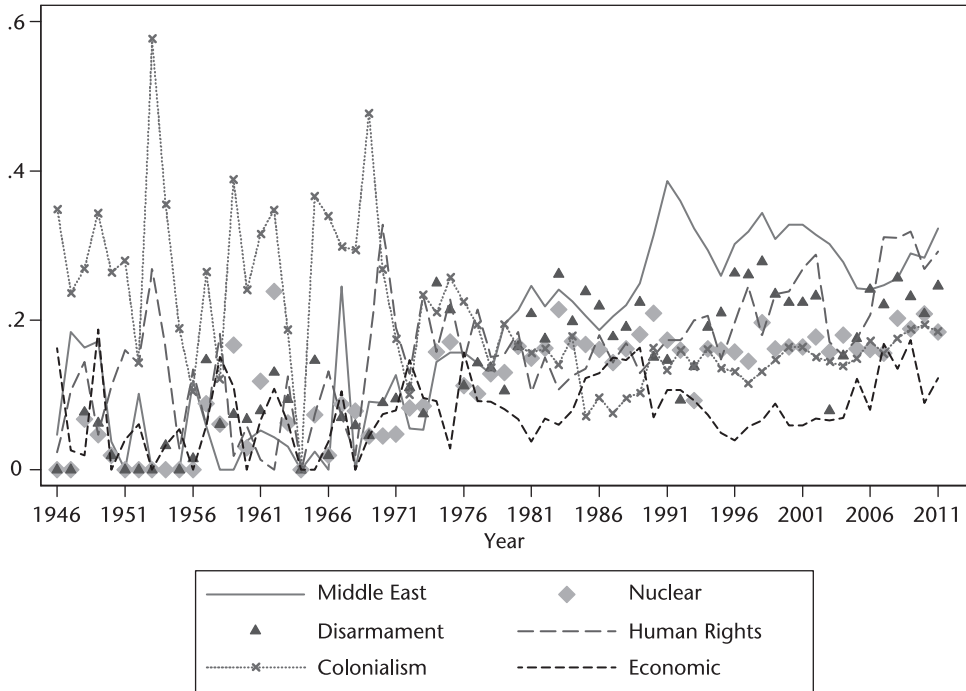


Figure 4.1 Issue areas of contested UN General Assembly votes, 1946–2011

votes) and correlated to structural factors such as civil wars or coups that could influence outcomes of interests.

The data also include information on the content of votes. First, the data identify those votes that the US lobbied on, as identified by the US State Department publication *Voting Practices in the United Nations*. Second, issue codes were assigned based on searches of the descriptions of resolutions.

Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of issue areas across time. Time is based on sessions, which usually run from September to December but occasionally stretch into the following year. The year 1964 was not accounted for because there were no votes over a dispute concerning the admission of Communist China.

There are a couple of striking patterns. First, Middle East issues have replaced colonialism issues as the most dominant agenda item (although human rights issues challenge this predominance in recent years). Often, about one-third of contentious UNGA votes concern the Middle East, which really means the Israel–Palestine conflict. The dominance of colonialism issues is even stronger in some years. This should be taken into consideration when evaluating indicators based on UN votes.

Second, especially in the first 30 years, there are large annual shifts in the content of the agenda. Thus voting coincidence between countries could rise or fall simply because the agenda changes, without any change in state interests. Ignoring this issue in time series applications could lead to biased inferences, as these changes in the agenda could be endogenous to outcomes. For example, violent conflicts tend to attract UN resolutions.

Voting patterns in the United Nations General Assembly

The study of UN roll-call voting flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. The earliest study is Ball's (1951) study of bloc voting within pre-determined groups. Other influential studies are Lijphart (1963), Alker (1964), Alker and Russett (1965), Russett (1966), Mueller (1967), and Newcombe et al. (1970). Riggs et al. (1970) give an overview of this early literature.

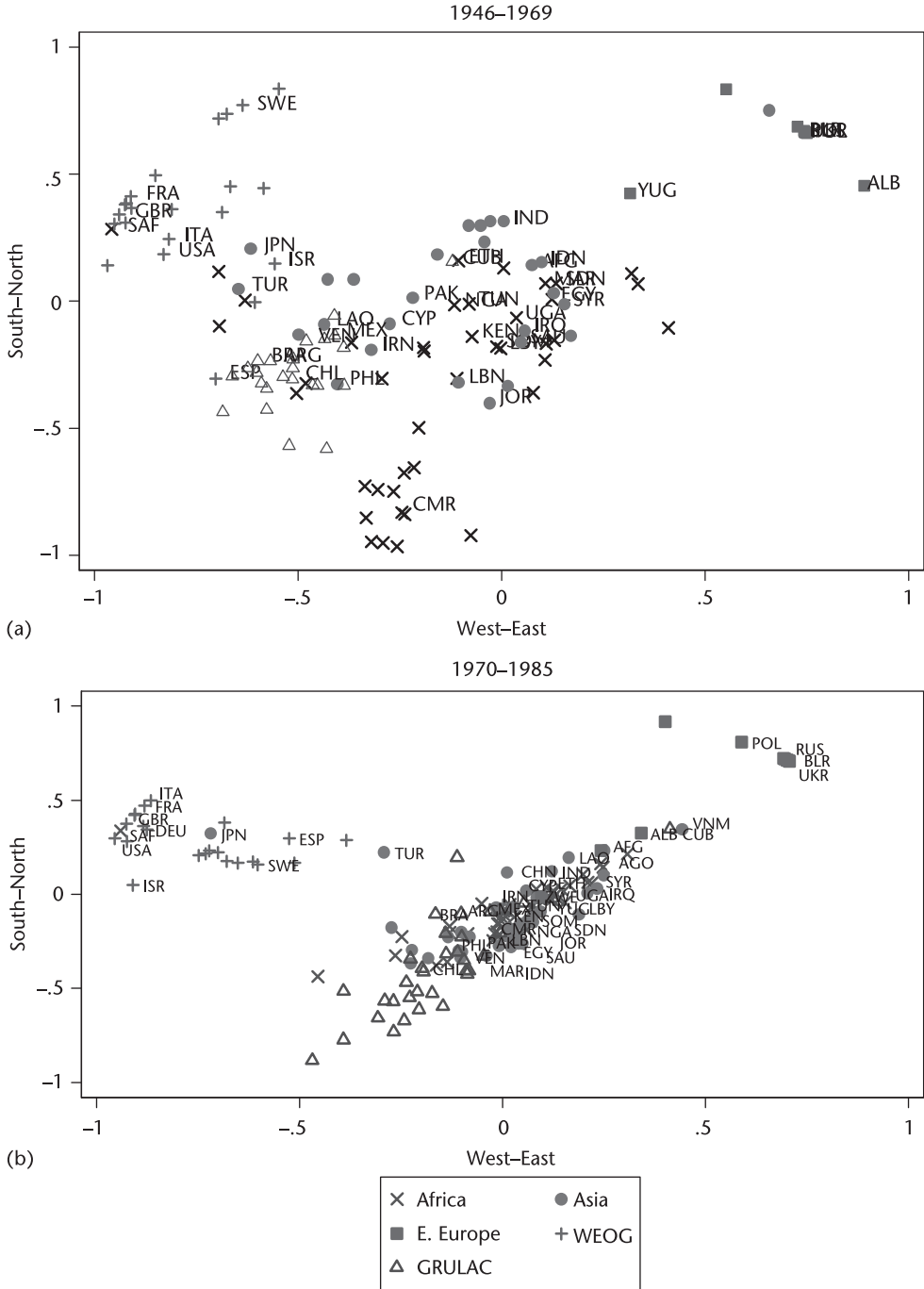
Figure 4.2 plots ideal points derived from states' UNGA vote choices for 1946–69 and 1970–85 respectively. These ideal points are estimated using W-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; see also Voeten 2000). Each resolution (not plotted) can be represented by a cutting line, where the model expects countries on each side of the line to vote with each other. The plots assume that countries have static ideal points in a policy space that has a consistent meaning within the time period. This assumption is not always realistic. Yet the plots provide a useful vehicle to explain the historical evolution of contestation in the UNGA. I highlight points of departure from the static assumptions in the narrative.³ Nevertheless, the static models accurately explain over 90 percent of actual vote choices in each period.

In Figure 4.2(a), the dominant dimension of UN voting separates the Soviet Bloc from the US and the Western European states. This conflict had already taken shape in the first UN sessions. The Soviet Bloc was isolated in the early days and almost always lost on Cold War issues (Rowe 1969). Colonialism issues and South Africa occasionally caused rifts between the US and its Western allies. Consequentially, the colonial powers rather than the US occupy the most extreme Western position during this period.

During the first five years there was an important orthogonal dimension of contestation concerning the issue of Palestine. Arab and most Asian countries opposed partition while the West and East stood united in favor of partition, although this unity proved to be short-lived. After Joseph Stalin's death, the Soviet Union started courting non-aligned states and generally voted with the Arab states. The Middle East issue thus became part of the first dimension. Nevertheless, the superpowers were still united on some North–South issues, such as their opposition to making the UN a more supranationalist institution over which the superpowers would have less control.

The early 1950s constituted a period in which the US actively and successfully used the UN for its foreign policy purposes. The multilateral authorization of the Korea intervention force and the 1950 Uniting for Peace Resolution that temporarily caused the UNGA to surpass the deadlocked Security Council as the most important political institution in the UN led even realists like Hans Morgenthau (1954) to hail the “new” UN as a useful mechanism through which the US could achieve its national objectives by multilateral means. Initially the Americans did not expect the end of the impasse over the admission of new members to change this. After all, the US sponsored the admission of 11 of the new members admitted in 1955, whereas the Soviet Union sponsored only four.

Yet, the introduction of new member states increased demands to deal with the issue of colonialism. The Soviet Union started to aggressively pursue the allegiance of the former colonies. This challenged the US to choose between these newer states and their most important allies, the “Old Europeans,” against whom the many anti-colonialism resolutions were targeted. In the mid-1950s the US position was further removed from its European allies than in any other period. Following the Western divisions during the Suez crisis and the failure of the UN to act against the Soviet invasion of Hungary (despite a resolution condemning it), many realists believed the compromises required for acting through the UN had become too costly in comparison to the benefits of multilateralism (e.g., Morgenthau 1956; Hoffmann



E. Europe = Eastern European Group
 GRULAC = Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries
 WEOG = Western European and Others Group

Figure 4.2 Contestation in the UN General Assembly during the Cold War

1957). Consequently, the US increasingly voted with the Europeans on colonial issues from 1957 until President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961.

The year 1960 was a milestone year for the UN. Seventeen new nations joined the organization, the UN embarked on a major peacekeeping mission to suppress the civil strife after the independence of the Congo, and the UNGA adopted the landmark Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev thought the 1960 UNGA plenary meeting so important that he and all Soviet Bloc leaders traveled by boat across the Atlantic to attend the meetings themselves (they stayed for four weeks). The big prize was the allegiance of former colonies. Most African states initially adopted a centrist position on the East–West conflict. Their internal divisions were along lines of colonial heritage. The former French colonies, assembled in the “Brazzaville caucus,” were clearly distinct from the former British and other colonies (the countries on the bottom of Figure 4.2A). Most of the divisions between these groups were on issues that pertained to African affairs, in particular the conflicts in the Congo and the partitioning of Rwanda and Burundi.

Many of the conflicts that divided countries in the 1960s had by now become familiar. The issue of the representation of Communist China, for instance, continued to divide states along East–West lines, with majorities against Beijing ranging from as large as 16 in 1963 to an evenly split vote in 1965 (Boyd 1971). The issue would not be resolved until 1971 when Beijing finally replaced Taipei as the official representation of China. The conflict in the Middle East now separated states primarily along East–West lines. The Six-Day War in 1967 and the resulting controversies made it the principal source of conflict in the late 1960s. There was still discord over the Congo, Korea, and other Cold War issues. Non-aligned countries were divided on these issues (Van Staden and Stokman 1970). The Soviet Bloc and the West persisted to vote together against the South on issues related to UN supranationalism, budget issues, and certain questions of self-determination.

By 1970 a majority of UN members were not independent states at the UN’s inception. States with only 10 percent of the world’s population and contributing only 5 percent of the assessed UN budget could theoretically muster a two-thirds majority in the UNGA. These developments made the UNGA a more difficult instrument for statecraft for both superpowers. Neither superpower could count on reliable majorities, let alone the kind of supermajorities necessary to authorize peacekeeping missions through the Uniting for Peace Resolution. Consequently, there was virtually no UN involvement in Vietnam, Afghanistan and other major conflicts in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The 1970s was also the period when developing countries increasingly perceived that to use the UN to their advantage they should emphasize common causes and put more divisive issues to the background. At a conference in Algiers in September 1973, they followed a call by Mexican President Luis Echeverría Álvarez to strive for the creation of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). The goals were to get more favorable terms of trade with developed countries, to receive more aid, to regulate investments of transnational companies, to reschedule debt, and to change international organization such that organizations with equal voting power, such as the UNGA, would have more authority. This essentially created a ‘third party’, commonly referred to as the Group of 77 (G77) or the Non-Aligned Movement (see Iida 1988). Indeed, Figure 4.2(b) shows three fairly cohesive voting blocs with a largely empty space between them. In the literature on the US Congress such empty channels are seen as indicative of polarization, in the sense that they are indicative of voting behavior where few cross party lines. The same can be said for this period in the UNGA, which was heavily dominated by “partisan” attempts to set the agenda and maintain cohesion. This may make votes in this period less useful indicators for preferences than in other periods.

To maintain internal unity, the countries belonging to the non-aligned voting bloc successfully ignored a number of divisive issues. For example, although the future of Burundi had divided African nations in the 1960s, when the leading Tutsi minority slaughtered more than 100,000 Hutus in 1973, the issue was mostly ignored in the UN. Nor did Asian countries put much pressure on the UN to address the situation in Uganda where Idi Amin deported virtually everyone of Asian descent in 1975. Moreover, it led to logrolls that probably undermined the effectiveness of the UN, most importantly the resolution that equated Zionism with racism in 1975. Originally introduced as an amendment to the first UN Declaration on the equality of women, it infuriated the Europeans and especially the Americans who, led by Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan, began a fierce battle to get the resolution rescinded. They did not succeed until the Cold War had ended (1991). Most of the successes of the South in achieving its goals, in particular regarding terms of trade and debt rescheduling, were achieved outside of the framework of the UN (Mingst and Karns 1995). Within the UN, the North–South conflict soon resulted in a stalemate (Doyle 1983).

In 1987, *Pravda* published an article in which Mikhail Gorbachev made a strong commitment to the UN, a pledge he repeated in a speech to the UNGA. This unlocked opportunities for a number of smaller peacekeeping missions and UN-instigated negotiations in contentious conflicts such as those in Afghanistan, Angola and Namibia, and El Salvador, and the Iran–Iraq war. In the UNGA, the disintegration of the Soviet voting bloc started in 1989 when some Eastern European states, led by Czechoslovakia, shifted toward the West. The Soviet Union followed in 1991 as Russia. Yet, subtle changes occurred before then (see also Figure 4.4 in the next section). By 1987 the Soviet Bloc was no longer furthest removed from the US. Instead, this distinction belonged to Algeria, Angola, Cuba, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

Figure 4.3 shows the post-Cold War ideological structure in the UNGA. A model that assumes that states hold static ideal points along a single dimension explains 94 percent of vote choices on non-consensus UNGA resolutions in both the 1991–2000 and 2001–11 periods. This ideological structure contains new elements but also resembles patterns of the Cold War structure. The main exceptions to the stability are the Eastern European states, which switched sides. Russia and the newly independent former Soviet republics now take a position in between the West and the rest of the world. Their position resembles that of states such as Turkey and South Korea. These are all states with strong ties to both the West and the non-Western part of the world (but for different reasons).

Yet, the position of developing countries before the end of the Cold War is a very good predictor of their position since the end of the Cold War (Voeten 2000). The Latin American countries are still closest to the West, followed by a group of African and Asian countries. On the ‘non-Western’ pole are the remaining communist states: Laos, North Korea, Vietnam, China, and Cuba. But we also find states such as Afghanistan, Burma, India, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Sudan, and Syria close to the extreme side of the first dimension of conflict. These are not necessarily prototypical representatives of the countries that were seeking to establish the NIEO in the 1970s and 1980s. They are states that challenge principles of political liberalism and the dominance of the US. This finding lends support for the thesis that a counter-hegemonic bloc is forming among states that do not necessarily share many common interests other than a common aversion to Western hegemony and the principles associated with that. It is this common antipathy that determines vote choices over many global issues.

The liberal–non-liberal divide becomes more prominent in the 2000s (Figure 4.3(b)) when human rights issues become an increasingly prominent feature on the UN’s agenda (see Figure 4.1). Whereas the right side of the policy space contained some liberal democracies in the 1990s (e.g., India), it is now completely occupied by repressive dictatorships.

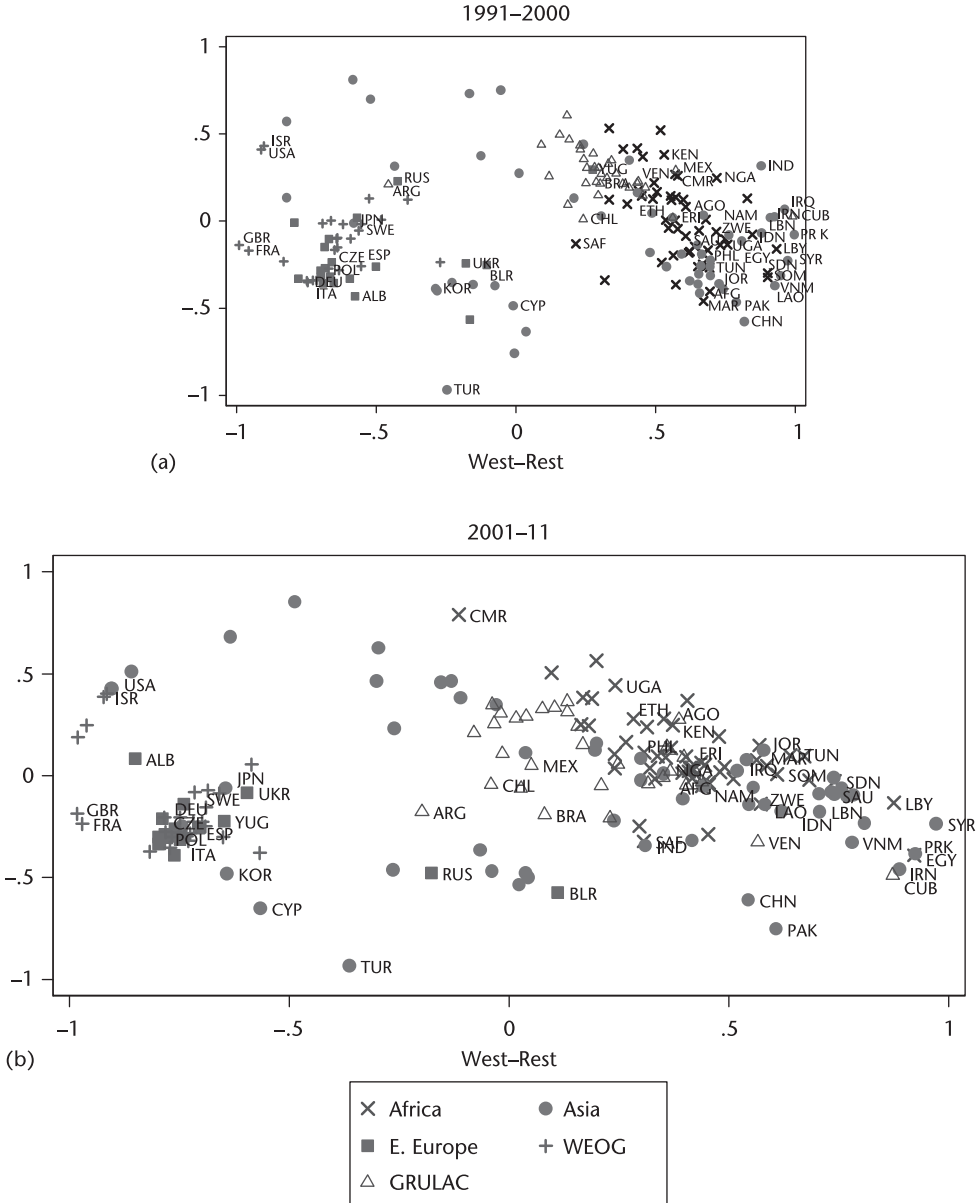


Figure 4.3 Contestation in the UN General Assembly in the post-Cold War period

The second dimension mostly consists of conflict over issues that separate the US (and Israel) from its allies. This does not only involve issues directly related to Palestine but also resolutions on which the US has lost support from its European allies and has only Israel and some Pacific islands left in support (e.g., the Cuban boycott).

In short, the first dimension of contestation has been quite consistent and has mostly separated the US and its allies from those who oppose them. Nevertheless, there have been

important shifts in the UNGA's agenda that occasionally make a second dimension relevant and that alter the content of UN resolutions. Moreover, the UN has been more representative of conflicts elsewhere in some periods than in others, although even in the 1970–88 period the main dimension of contestation accurately reflects the Cold War conflict.

United Nations votes as indicators for state preferences

As highlighted in the introduction, current scholarship is not primarily interested in the UNGA *per se* but uses UNGA votes to calculate the degree to which states have common foreign policy “interests” or “preferences.” Preferences and interests play an important role in many International Relations theories but are difficult to operationalize. The use of UN votes for this purpose is not entirely new. For example, Vengroff (1976), Moon (1985), and Hagan (1989) used UN voting data to test Rosenau's (1966) hypothesis that domestic instability in developing countries leads to shifts in foreign policy preferences. Yet indicators based on UN votes have now become an almost obligatory ingredient in models that explain bilateral and multilateral lending, international conflict, and a host of other outcomes.

There is some justification for this. United Nations votes have many advantages over alternative sources of data that can serve to construct indicators for state interests. Alliance choices are sticky and reflect the strategic security environment as much as (or more than) state preferences. Two geographically distant states with highly similar policy preferences may never close an alliance. Some formal alliances survive even if states become rivals. Other informal alliances are never formalized (e.g., Israel and the US). There is no obvious other source of data where so many states over such a long time period have revealed policy positions on such a wide set of issues. Moreover, as the previous section illustrates, the main dimensions of contestation in the UN are reflective of contestation over global policy issues. This is even true for the 1970–85 period when issues that were somewhat peripheral to the interests of great powers dominated the UNGA's agenda.

On the other hand, scholars have by and large failed to motivate why an indicator based on UN votes is an appropriate operationalization for their theoretical concept of interest. Most obviously, one should consider what UN votes are about. For example, some of the conflict literature uses UN votes to test the implications of bilateral bargaining models where states have conflicting interests over territory (e.g., Reed et al. 2008). Yet, UN votes concern *global* issues on which many states with territorial disputes have similar preferences. Iran and Iraq, India and Pakistan, Peru and Ecuador, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and other states with fierce border disputes are quite alike when it comes to UN voting. Thus, the use of UN votes is appropriate only if the relevant theoretical concept of interest concerns global political issues. Unfortunately, most of the literature fails to specify what is meant theoretically with “common foreign policy interests,” let alone justify UN votes as the appropriate source of data.

Another crucial issue is the method by which indicators of interests or preferences are computed. The canonical approach is to compute a dyadic measure of similarity of voting patterns. This can be an ordinal measure such as Kendall's τ_b (Bueno de Mesquita 1975) or a Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (Gartzke 1998, 2000). Others treat UN votes as interval measures, with abstentions halfway between a yes and a no vote. Such measures include Lijphart's (1963) index of agreement and Signorino and Ritter's (1999) S-score, which in its most common form is identical to Lijphart's index of agreement.

These measures suffer from various deficiencies. Dyadic indicators cannot capture the multiple underlying dimensions of UN voting. Votes in the UN are not choices on how much state A likes state B but whether a state approves of a resolution. Conceptually, estimates of

preferences should be based on a theory of how states translate preferences into vote choices. The spatial voting model offers such a theory and has been the basis for empirical estimates of preferences in legislatures all over the world for almost three decades. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 were created using such a method (NOMINATE in this case). There is no good reason why the UNGA should be the only assembly for which the analysis of roll calls resorts to dyadic similarity indicators popular in the 1960s. Yet, with few exceptions (Voeten 2000, 2004; Reed et al. 2008), that is the state of affairs.

The most important deficiency, however, is the lack of attention for dynamics. Indicators of preference similarity are almost always used in time series cross-sectional analyses (panels). This means that often it is changes in preferences that matter, especially in fixed effects models. Current methods are unable to disentangle the effects of agenda changes from preference changes (see Voeten 2004). While the UNGA's agenda is quite stable with many resolutions repeated each year, multiple votes tend to take place whenever major crises occur. Given that there are only about 80 resolutions a year, multiple resolutions on a specific crisis can strongly bias annual dyadic similarity measures if left unaccounted for. This is obviously problematic if the goal is to explain participation in conflicts, but it may also be important for the aid literature, as we know that aid responds to the outbreak of (civil) wars. More generally, the agenda shifts identified in the previous section could decrease or increase observed voting similarities between a pair of states even if neither state actually changes its interest.

Figure 4.4 illustrates this point using the US–Soviet Union (Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, USSR)/Russia dyad. The dotted line offers the S-score, which is the most widely used indicator of voting similarity. It varies between -1 (no similarity) and 1 (identical voting patterns). There are several reasons why these are implausible estimates for common interests. First, according to S-scores, two countries had more similar interests during several periods

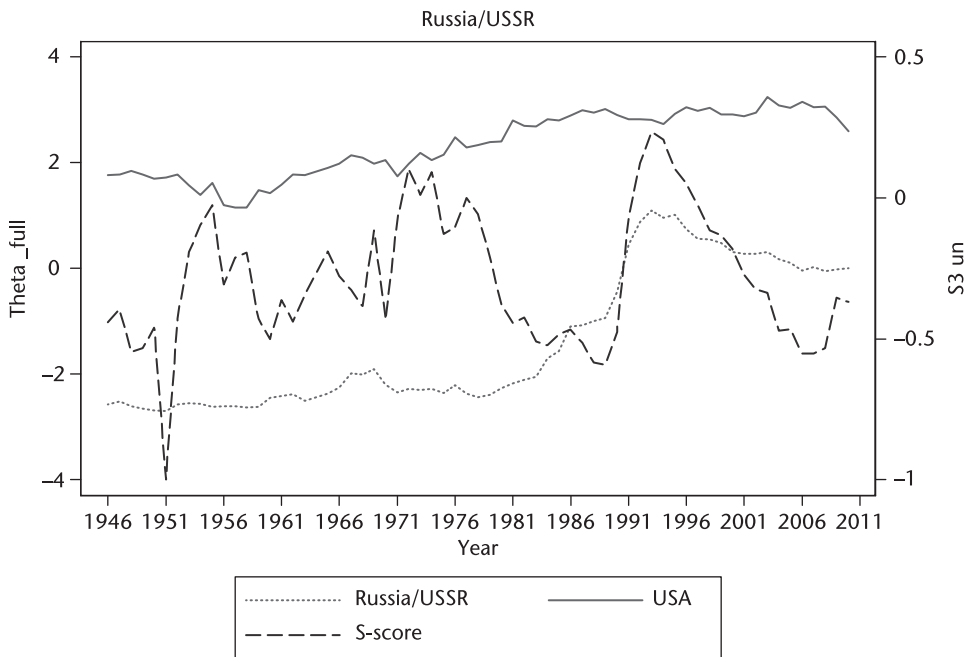


Figure 4.4 Similarity in vote choices, USSR and US, S-scores and dynamic ideal points

of the Cold War (mid-1950s and mid-1970s) than during most of the post-Cold War period with the exception of a few years in the early 1990s. It is somewhat absurd to imply that in the 2000s, the US and Russia, however acrimonious their relationship can sometimes be, are further apart than the Soviet Union and the US were during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Second, S-scores fluctuate considerably from one year to the next. It is questionable whether these reflect real changes in preferences rather than agenda changes. For example, the 6th Plenary Session (1951) held about half the votes of sessions before and after. This was mostly due to the dearth of colonialism resolutions, on which the Soviet Union and the US often voted alike in that period. The increased S-scores in the early 1970s were surely due to many NIEO resolutions (discussed in the previous section) on which the Soviet Union and the US often agreed rather than a true change in preferences.

Figure 4.4 also plots dynamic ideal points estimated by Bailey et al. (2013). They use a model that separates agenda change from preference change by fixing identical resolutions that are repeated (see Voeten 2004). Using this methodology yields estimates with greater face validity. The gap between the ideal points does not fluctuate erratically. The model accurately keeps the two countries much further apart during the Cold War than at any point during the Cold War's aftermath. Yet the ideal points do capture real interest shifts, not just the early 1990s but also Gorbachev's efforts to reconcile with the West in the mid-1980s. An added bonus is that estimates of ideal points allow us to detect whether it is the US or the Soviet Union that changes positions.

A more detailed discussion of methodology is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, Figure 4.4 is by no means a cherry-picked example of what goes wrong in conventional calculations of the common interests of states. Changes in the UN's agenda must be modeled in order to adequately model changes in state preferences.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed 60 years of analyses that use UN General Assembly voting data. Initially, these analyses were motivated by a desire to understand politics in the UN. The current literature shows little interest in the UN but uses voting data to construct indicators of "common state interests." I have argued that scholars who do this would be wise to think more carefully what these votes are about before choosing to rely on these data. The brief overview of UN voting patterns offered in this chapter may help in this regard. Second, the methodology used to construct indicators of state interests matters greatly. In particular, it is unwise to rely on dyadic indicators of voting similarity, especially for dynamic applications.

Recommended for further reading

Alker and Russett (1965), Gartzke (1998), Thacker (1999), and Voeten (2000).

Notes

- 1 For example, the last session for which we have these data included zero amendments, zero failed votes, and one paragraph vote.
- 2 By comparison, 23 percent of abstentions are followed by another abstention.
- 3 The narrative draws on much more detailed analysis in Voeten (2001).

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